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-Congressman Howard P. "Buck" McKeon
Chairman, House Education & the Workforce Committee

[On English Language, Reid-Kennedy Bill Raises More Questions Than It Answers](#)

by Howard P. "Buck" McKeon

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Earlier this year, there was much fanfare surrounding the U.S. Senate's attempts to promote the English language as part of its immigration bill pushed through the Senate by Minority Leader Harry Reid (D.-Nev.), Teddy Kennedy (D.-Mass.) and others. Substantial media attention -- on television, in newspaper stories, and on many editorial pages -- was devoted to what seemed like a major legislative step toward underscoring the importance of our nation's immigrants learning and speaking English. But, in the end, it was all for naught. Rather than a step forward for those who see the English language as essential for assimilation into American society, the Reid-Kennedy bill instead took a step back.

Two English language amendments were adopted during the Senate debate -- and uncertainty ruled the day, both then and now. The first amendment adopted would have made English the national language and required those applying for citizenship to be proficient in English and learn American history. However, shortly after, another much weaker amendment followed. It deemed English a "common and unifying language" and -- incredibly -- reaffirmed President

Clinton's Executive Order 13166, which guaranteed immigrants' rights to demand that the federal government communicate with them in any language they choose ... and at the taxpayers' expense. For an amendment which allegedly was offered to promote English, the fact that it also reaffirmed this controversial executive order is troubling, to say the least.

Even now, months after the Senate votes, questions remain about which amendment takes precedence over the other and, more importantly, whether this was a missed opportunity to stress the importance of the English language in the ongoing immigration debate. What this matter needs is a serious and broad examination -- and sooner rather than later.

Today, a key subcommittee of the House Education and the Workforce Committee will begin that serious examination. The panel will gather input from a diverse panel of witnesses, who will discuss varying perspectives on the need to make English the official language. In the wake of the Senate's actions on English -- not to mention its adoption of the troubling language to reaffirm the Clinton executive order -- this hearing will be the first step toward sorting out this web of confusion.

Several weeks ago, in announcing the new series of hearings on border security and immigration enforcement, House Republican leaders made clear that the final bill we send to President Bush will reflect five core principles. One of them states that Republicans believe the success of our country depends upon newcomers assimilating into American society by learning English. This principle is not new to the Education & the Workforce Committee. That's because it's also a core principle of the most sweeping law within our panel's jurisdiction -- the No Child Left Behind Act -- as well.

Regardless of your views on No Child Left Behind, the fact remains that a key aspect of it is its focus on Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. It shines a spotlight to ensure LEP students are excelling in school and making adequate progress in math and reading, and taxpayers commit hundreds of millions of dollars to this effort each year. In stark contrast to the spirit of the Clinton executive order, No Child Left Behind insists that LEP students communicate in and learn English. It's that simple.

No Child Left Behind is straightforward about the importance of the English language, and any border security bill we send to President Bush should be as well. That is why the Education and the Workforce Committee is the perfect

venue for a serious discussion about how best to ensure that those coming to America legally learn English and assimilate into our society. In short, we'll fulfill our responsibility where the Reid-Kennedy supporters didn't

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